

Morality: Relative or Absolute?
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Wasilla Bible Church
June 28, 2009

What we're going to do today is we are going to continue working through our Defender series. It's a summer sermon series that we are going through to look at challenges—common challenges to the Christian faith. And so as we do so we've come to the point where we're going to talk about the issue of morality today. Oftentimes how this challenge is raised is through some sort of a statement like "Morality is something that just depends on your perspective and culture." It's something that what's right for you may not be right for somebody else. What's right for you in your culture might be totally wrong for somebody else. So who are you to say what's right and wrong? It's the idea that morality is relative, and that's what we're going to be looking at. It's usually applied to Christians because the Bible claims to have an absolute moral law contained within, and to be an absolute moral law revealed—God's law.

So we're going to be looking at this here today. And as we do, just in case you haven't been here, you're visiting, it's probably going to have a little bit different feel because part of this...we don't go into...we aren't working our way through a particular book of the Bible or something like that. So we'll be getting to a passage in Romans, but that'll come towards the tail end of the sermon.

So as we start here what I'm going to first outline is this—what do I mean by morality? You see, for...I go ahead and define this because there are some of you who maybe have more of a philosophical background, training in ethics, and all that, whatever, and you wonder about technical definitions. I'm throwing those technical definitions aside, ok? So I'm wanting to be very clear what I'm talking about when I speak about morality. Morality, as our culture, as our society commonly refers to it...it's basically it's just your code of conduct, ok? It's your system, your set of standards that determine worth and value. It's the set of standards by which you assign worth and value to different objects or actions, different people and beings, animals, and whatever—life itself. It's this whole system of values that you have. That is typically how our culture refers to morality. And so when I speak of morality here that's what I'm talking about, ok?

As we get into this there are basically two options in our society and in general. It's basically that morality is either relative or it's absolute. I have yet to meet anyone who does not have some system of beliefs by which they judge what is better, what is worse, etc., etc. People...everyone has some sort of morality, and so morality not existing kind of isn't so much of a practical option. Our two real options are 'is morality relative or is it absolute?' By 'relative' what I mean is that it depends on your personal perspective, or your personal culture. What's right for you may not be right for someone else, and vice versa. Or is morality absolute? Is there some sort of moral standard that overrides everyone, every culture? Are there some things that are just wrong—no matter where you come from, no matter what time you live in there are some things that are just wrong, you don't do 'em. Is morality absolute or is it relative?

Well, I have to confess, and I'm going to go ahead and confess my bias here—I am someone who believes in absolute morality. I believe that morals...like there is a moral law that over...there are some cultural norms that shift, but there is a moral law that overarches everyone and everything. And so I just...I need to confess that. And as I do I just want to explain that I genuinely do believe that everyone knows that there is a God, and He is the source of absolute morality. I believe that every single person knows that in their heart. However, many people choose to suppress that intellectually. And so there's a breakdown between what they're thinking they believe and what their heart actually believes and their lives reflect. Ok? Does that make sense? Ok, you're with me? Now you can have some sort of feedback nods, yeah, ok?

Basically, I believe that everyone knows the moral law, but some people choose to turn their back on it and deny that some absolute morality exists. And so what I'm going to do here in the next few minutes is I hope to...I'm not going to set out to prove morality is absolute to you and convince you of something that you didn't already know. What I hope to do is actually just kind of lay open our hearts just a little bit so that we can see for ourselves our own lives, our own hearts, and so that hopefully you can see that you already know this. And I hope to go ahead and kind of lay this open so that you can see this is something that every single person already knows. It's something that we may have to be reminded of, but we already know it. We don't have to be convinced of it. We just have to be reminded of it. And so that's what I'm going to do here.

As we do, I'll start out by looking at what is relative morality. If morality is relative, if it changes from person to person or culture to culture, what are the implications of that? Well, first of all, if you believe...if you actually believe that morality is relative, then you have to answer a series of very uncomfortable, difficult questions. Ok? And I'll go through just a couple of these, and if we were sitting down in a long conversation we could have a give-and-take where I could keep going through a whole bunch of these. But we'll hit on just a couple of them here to point it out. First of all, do you believe in human rights? Do you believe in human rights? Yes or no? Do you believe that human trafficking is wrong? No matter what culture you belong...no matter what you say, is slavery in all its various types wrong? What about the oppression of women, where they have no legal standing and it is perfectly...in fact, I think of the fundamentalist Islamic country not so long ago where a woman was convicted of adultery because she was raped. Is that wrong? Or is it right? If it's wrong, then what basis do you have to say that if you believe that morality is relative? I mean, they're from a different culture; they have a different set of beliefs; they have a different code of conduct. If morality is relative where do human rights come from? And why is it that we can't let go of this idea that I don't care what culture you're from, there are some things you shouldn't do. That's one thing.

Another question along the same lines, but it brings it a little bit closer—do you insist and expect fair treatment or right treatment from people who interact with you and your loved ones? Are you ok with people doing whatever they want to you, or to your child, to your brother, your sister, your spouse, your boyfriend, girlfriend, whomever? Are you ok with that, or do you insist that no, there should be...I don't care what your personal perspective is, I don't care what you think is ok for you to do...there are some things that you should just not do. I don't care what your personal perspective is. There's just some things that you should not do. You see, when we referred to things being fair, we are appealing to some higher standard that we feel in our hearts. We don't have to train...I tell you what, with two preschool...well, now my daughter is six, she's going into first grade. But I tell you what...soon as Liam, my three-year-old...as soon as he could talk it was amazing how quickly back and forth Charlotte and Liam would be arguing about what was fair. I didn't teach 'em that. But still, in their hearts they knew...they appealed to...I don't know where they got this concept of 'fair', but it was just there. And the thing is, everybody argues about it. We argue about...we're all appealing to some sort of higher standard that applies to everyone, no matter what their perspective or their culture is. That's what we're appealing to.

So the question is this, kind of a final question in this short series, is this—doesn't this mean that you actually do believe in some sort of moral standards that cross personal perspective and cultural boundaries? Doesn't this mean that you do believe that there is at least some sort of moral law that crosses cultural and personal lines? And those moral standards apply, regardless of how emphatically someone argues that morality is relative and it just doesn't matter.

See, the problem is we can't answer 'why?' Why? Why do we have this sense that things should be fair? Why do we have this unshakeable, innate sense and belief that there are some things that are just right, and there are some things that are wrong, that we have this innate belief that there are some sort of absolute moral standards, that they do exist? Why is it that it's impossible for us to consistently live as though morality is relative? Why is it impossible for us to consistently live that way, no matter how emphatically we say in our heads we believe that?

It's because in our hearts we know that it's not the case. And so we're living out of our hearts, what our heart knows to be true, and we're professing with our mouths what we think we believe. There's a breakdown between what we think we believe and what we really believe in the depth of our being.

And so there's a couple of answers that are frequently given for 'Why? Why do we have this sense of moral obligation?' One of the common explanations...I think of Richard Dawkins...the selfish gene...he tries to make this argument as part of this; but basically, our sense of moral obligation is just an evolutionary effect. That's all it is. It's just a result of natural selection that came about over millions, or thousands, or however long, you know, human history and our evolutionary ancestors, all of this. It's something that simply came about because of that. There's a problem with this, however. And the problem is basically this—strict evolutionary naturalism is amoral. If we're talking about naturalistic, evolutionary processes, natural selection, it is amoral. It has no morality; there is no moral or immoral. It is amoral. The only thing that natural selection values is the passing on of genetic code. Ok? Makes sense. I'm assuming that we have enough familiarity with natural selection that we understand that if that is true, what it values...if evolutionary natural selection is true, what it values is passing on genetic code. That is what is most important. And so, here's where it breaks down for humans—survival of the fittest. Why is it that we have a problem with the stronger preying on the weaker? That's the way the whole natural world works. We don't look at an animal and say, 'No! Lion, it's cruel! That gazelle, it doesn't have as much of a chance. You shouldn't be just strangling it to death as you, you know, wrap your jaws around its neck.' But that's the way nature works. Why is it...and that's what the lion has to do to pass on its genes. Why is that not acceptable for humans?

Let's think about it this way. Firefighters—we hold 'em up and we're like 'firefighters, heroes, finest, bravest'; they are roll models. Why? If our moral obligation is simply an evolutionary effect, why? It's simply...I mean, think about this. You have a firefighter. It is someone who has his own genetic code. He charges into a burning building to try and save someone he doesn't even know who has a completely different genetic code. If that's the case, and he does that, he is putting his own genetic code at risk to save the genetic code of someone else. Why? If anything, if our sense of moral obligation was actually an evolutionary effect, we would see that as immoral. We would...it goes totally against the whole idea of natural selection, because he is endangering his own genetic code, which is something that goes totally against natural selection, to save the genetic code of someone else, of some other being. See, evolutionary...a week ago, more in depth here, but I've gotta move on. Evolutionary effect—that is not the reason that we have a sense of moral obligation.

Second most common response that I think I've encountered is that morality is just determined by utilitarianism, the idea that we seek the greatest good. Whatever is moral is what's best for the greatest number of people. Well, here's the problem with this one, ok? What if the majority decides to eliminate a minority in the best interests of the greater good? It's not a hypothetical question—Nazi Germany. They believed in natural selection, they believed in a naturalistic mindset totally apart from God, and they believed that, honestly, utilitarianism...they believed that what was in the best interests of the majority, and including the human race, was to go ahead and purge those who were less perfect. And so they started eliminating, you know, ethnic minorities, and they started eliminating people who had physical or mental disabilities. They started eliminating people of various nationalities, people who didn't look like them, people who had various lifestyles or religious beliefs or whatever it was. If you weren't what was part of the greater good you were eliminated.

But still, yet, we look at it and we say no, that's wrong. If that's wrong, then we know that utilitarianism is not the reason for our sense of moral obligation. It's not about the greater good. The majority does not have the right to wipe out the minority simply because they have the power to do so. Even if they decide that that's what's in the greater good, it's not right.

So where does that leave us? Well basically, the problem of moral relativism is this—no one consistently lives...no one that I've ever met, anyway...sure, there might be somebody out there that I have not met yet, I don't know. But no one who I have ever met consistently lives as a moral relativist. No one. What this means is I would simply just kind of...if you look at this and you feel morality might be relative, I would simply point this one thing out and then ask you a question. If morality really is relative, then that mean that you can say 'I don't like something; I don't like what this person did to me. It makes me feel unhappy. I don't like that.' But you can no longer speak with integrity about that person being wrong for doing it. You can no longer speak with integrity about human rights or judge the Nazis for what they did. If morality is based on cultural convention or personal perspective, you have no right to judge them for what they did. You have no ability to say what is fair and what is unfair, what is better and what is worse. You have no ability. You can say what your personal preference is, but you cannot make an actual moral judgment about anything that anyone else does, no matter how horrific it may be. And so the question I would ask you is can you really live like that? Can you really live like that? My guess is you probably can't. I've yet to meet someone who can, no matter how emphatically they may insist that morality is relative.

And so...there's this quote from Tim Keller. It's from his book, "The Reason for God." He has a chapter on morality. And what he says...he says

I hope you see the disharmony between the world your intellect has devised and the real world (and God) that your heart knows exists. This leads us to a crucial question. If a premise ("There is no God") leads to a conclusion you know isn't true ("Napping babies is culturally relative" [*that's not ok no matter what culture you're in*]) then *why not change the premise?*

If what you start out saying you believe leads to something that you know cannot be true, then why not change the premise that there is no absolute morality? You see, when we look at these two options that's why, as I look at this, that is why I'm an absolute moralist. That is because I look at it and I say I cannot consistently live—and I have yet to meet anyone who can consistently live—as though morality is relative. We all live as though morality is absolute. And so that's why I say yes, morality is absolute. There are some things...there is a moral law that does say that some things are right and some things are wrong, regardless of your perspective or culture.

Well, Tim Keller...and I'm gonna continue to quote him just because I think this excerpt here...this is the best chapter, concise, that I've ever read on morality just for a concise explanation of this argument. But he says we have two options how to respond once we realize there is a difference between what our heart knows and what our head says it knows. There are two options.

One is that we can simply refuse to think out the implications of all this. [We can simply choose to ignore it.] We can hold onto our intellectual belief in an empty Bench [that there is no moral judge overruling and overwatching everyone] and yet live as though our choices are meaningful and as if there is a difference between love and cruelty. But why would we do that? A cynic might say that this is a way of “having one’s cake and eating it, too.” That is, you get the benefit of having a God without the cost of following Him. But there is no integrity in that.

There is no integrity in that. The other option is that we can recognize

...that you *do* know that there is a God. You could accept the fact that you live as if beauty and love have meaning, as if there is meaning in life, as if human beings have inherent dignity—all because you know that God exists. It is dishonest to live as if He is there and yet fail to acknowledge the One who has given you all of these gifts.

Those are basically your two options. You can choose not to think about it, and live a life where your head says one thing and your heart says another, live a life that lacks integration and therefore, by definition, lacks integrity; or you can go ahead and admit—and we can argue about what the absolute morality is; I think that basically it comes down to a theistic morality, and we can follow that further if you have any questions—there has to be a God that is the source for morality. Or we can admit there is a God and that morality is absolute.

That’s why I started off by saying I genuinely do believe that every single person knows that there is a God who is the source of absolute morality. However, some people choose to suppress that knowledge.

What does Paul say about this? Well, Paul explains the problem in Romans chapters 1 through 3. And what he says is...I’ll just go through these real quickly. In Romans chapter 1-3...in chapter 1 verses 18-21, he’s making this argument and he develops it over the whole course of the book of Romans. But what he says is that every person knows that God exists, but some people suppress this knowledge. We know it because of the creation around us, by looking at the world, by looking at the way things operate. We know that God exists. But some people suppress the knowledge that God exists because they don’t want to acknowledge Him, because that means that there’s an authority—an ultimate authority—that they have to recognize. He goes on in Romans chapter 2; he says not only that, but every single person knows that a moral law exists. He says this in Romans 2:15. He says that the law of God, this moral law, is written on our hearts. We know that it exists. That’s what we see here, that we’ve just seen. Everyone knows that it exists. Even if we suppress, and we don’t want to acknowledge God and we don’t want to acknowledge the source of that law that’s written on our hearts, we know it exists. And we can’t live otherwise. And then what he says in Romans chapter 3, verses 21-26, is that every single person falls short of that moral law. Every single person is guilty. I am guilty; I do not always do what is right, and I know it. That law that is written on my heart convicts me of the fact that I do not measure up to the moral law that everyone is held accountable to. And because of that, I deserve death. I deserve to die. I don’t deserve to be considered a morally upright, pure person who is worthy to be in the presence of God. I’m a moral reprobate. I break the moral law.

But the beautiful thing about the gospel and about Christianity is it says ‘You know what? We all are, except for Jesus Christ.’ He is the only one who ever lived a perfect, sinless life. He never broke that moral law. He never transgressed it. And so, because of that, He lived this perfect life. But then He died a death He did not deserve. He died a death I *do* deserve. And because He paid a debt that He did not owe, He can pay my debt. He’s got an account, so to speak, set up with the bank. Ok? If you get out of analogies, it’s like I am so deep in debt I would never be able to pay off my debt. But He didn’t owe anything, and He has this infinite bank account full of grace. And He is willing...He says ‘If you are willing to admit the fact that you are in debt, you are a sinner, you do fall short, and you can’t pay it, I am willing to pay that for you if you will just let me; if you will let me come in and have control of your life, of your bank account, I will come in and I will pay the price that you owe and you cannot pay yourself.’

That’s the beauty of the Christian gospel. The Christian message is that yes, we are all wrong. We all know that there is a moral law. We all transgress it. But there is One who loves us and who lived a perfect life. And He died so that we can know God, so that we can be declared redeemed, so that debt has been paid.

We’re going to close here in just a moment with a song that we sing. It’s a song of prayer for a thousand days of witness, just that we would be people who speak and share this message that we just talked about here. But before we do... If you have...there are a couple of resources if you have further questions about this. When we’re able to, we wanna let you know about ‘em. One is we’ve made...we got permission for this, ok, for those of you who are...we did get permission from the publishers. We have at the information table copies of the chapter on

morality from Timothy Keller's book, "The Reason for God." And they're available for like a dollar a piece out at the information table if you would like to take it and follow up on it. Depending on how familiar you are with different arguments it may be a little...it may take you a little time to read through, but it's actually pretty user-friendly. He wrote it for normal people. And it's something that follows through what we just kind of went through here today. And so...and the dollar a piece, that's basically to cover the costs that we had to pay the publisher for the rights to reproduce the chapter here.

But then also, there is one other book that I would recommend you check out, and we do not have it at the bookstore, so don't worry about asking for it there—we don't have it. It's C. S. Lewis' "Mere Christianity." And basically this book, "Mere Christianity"...he starts by arguing kind of what we did here, and working towards the idea that we all know that there's a God, and the Christian faith is the one that most matches the facts that we know in our heart about morality.

So please stand.

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

Go in grace.